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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the parental involvement component of Project Follow Through, a Federally funded program designed to follow up on the children who had participated in Project Head Start. Comments and impressions gathered from interviews with teachers, parents and administrators in school districts that were linked to one Follow Through sponsor, the University of Pittsburgh, are presented. Increased parent participation is evaluated and the problems of adjustment faced by both teachers and parents are discussed. Parents, it is said, reported positive results, including a greater understanding of their children's behavior. Furthermore, political involvement by parents is said to have been successful in obtaining continued funding for Project Follow Through. Mechanisms by which parents can be further involved in their children's educational activities are outlined. (Author/APM)

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## INVOLVING PARENTS IN CHILDREN'S EDUCATION: LESSONS FROM PROJECT FOLLOW THROUGH

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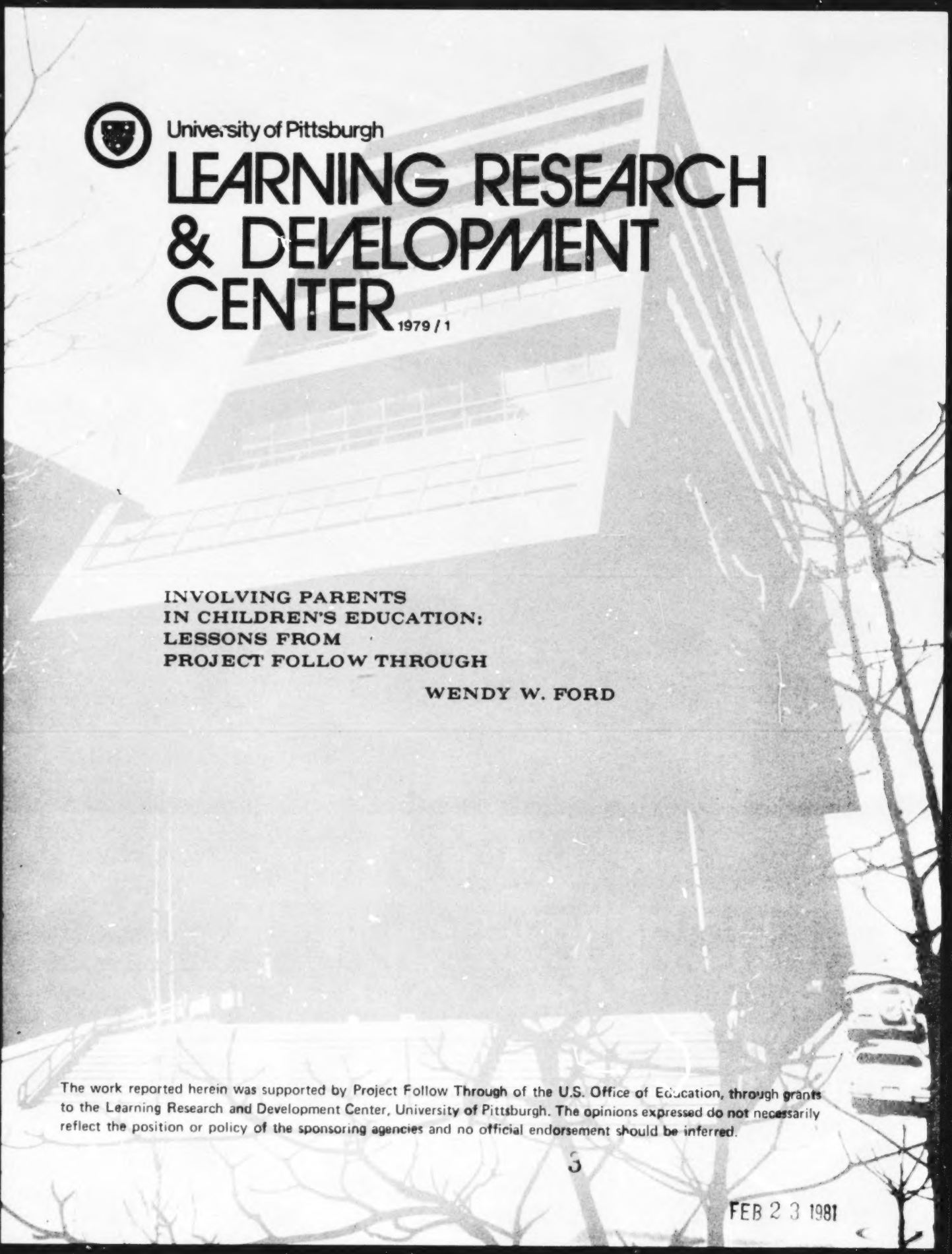

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# INVOLVING PARENTS IN CHILDREN'S EDUCATION: LESSONS FROM PROJECT FOLLOW THROUGH

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# INVOLVING PARENTS IN CHILDREN'S EDUCATION: LESSONS FROM PROJECT FOLLOW THROUGH

by

Wendy W. Ford

"Home and school should work together" is education's new axiom. The refrain is heard again and again: Parents, let your children know you care about education and support what the schools are doing. Encourage your children to work hard, read with them at home, ask about their school day, visit the school, talk to the teachers. Children do better in school, we are told, if parents do their part at home.

But we have found that building effective links between home and school is far from easy. PTA meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and yearly open houses are not enough--and are not well enough attended--to ensure adequate communication. Having neither time nor opportunity for deeper involvement, many parents remain completely isolated from the schools.

In at least one group of school communities, however, the outlook for parent involvement is bright. A little-publicized federal compensatory education program, Project Follow Through, is successfully putting parents in touch with the schools. A rural mountain community in Pennsylvania boasts that in one year, parents put in over 1,700 hours of volunteer time in twenty-seven Follow Through classrooms. In a southwestern city, parent involvement is touted as "one of the best public relations things we've ever done." In a small midwestern farm town, so

many parents have written and phoned their congressman about funding for Follow Through that he has pleaded with them to "call off the troops."

In 170 communities scattered across the United States, Project Follow Through is quietly demonstrating that parent involvement programs can be established and even flourish once parents realize the important role they play. Follow Through parents are working side-by-side with teachers in the classrooms. They are learning how to support their children's learning at home. And they are building a base of political experience that gives them power to shape the future of children's education.

These things have not happened by accident. By federal mandate, Project Follow Through had to set up specific mechanisms to make sure parents became involved. What nobody counted on was how the parent programs have taken hold. Today Follow Through parents are not only involved, but committed to being involved in their children's education. How has this come about?

About ten years ago, a new federal program was launched to help "improve the life chances" of children from economically disadvantaged families. It set out to remedy their chronic educational deficiencies by exposing them to new designs for classroom learning. In addition, they would receive comprehensive nutritional, dental, medical, and social services. The program was called Project Follow Through, because it followed up on children who had participated in Head Start,

a federally funded preschool program. Under Follow Through, low-income parents were to participate on an unprecedented scale and in a much more direct way than had been customary in traditional educational systems.

The central feature of Project Follow Through was an instructional component for grades K through 3. Eligible communities had a choice among a number of innovative instructional programs. These programs, newly developed by roughly twenty universities and institutions, designated as program sponsors, varied widely in philosophy and goals. Some emphasized problem solving, independent learning, and creativity. Some applied strict behavioral principles to the teaching of basic subjects. Some focused on improving classroom learning, while others sought to make education more relevant to the community. But each approach represented a departure from traditional classroom organization and learning. The idea was to try out new ways to educate disadvantaged children, because traditional methods did not seem to be working as they should.

To guarantee low-income parents a voice in running the program, each local Follow Through project was required to have a Policy Advisory Committee empowered to shape the various program components in its community. Beyond the establishment of such a committee, each community-sponsor team developed its own mechanisms for parent involvement.

To find out how Follow Through parent programs are building successful links between families and schools, I interviewed parents, teachers, and administrators in school districts linked to one Follow Through sponsor, the University of Pittsburgh. Their comments and personal experiences give voice to an enthusiasm and dedication which is characteristic of Follow Through parents in diverse communities all across the country.

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In a small town high in the Pennsylvania mountains, Dolly Hanley, a Follow Through parent, presides over a busy group of third graders. Her favorite chore is getting them interested in reading books for fun. "I really build a book up," says Dolly, "When I read for my children, I put a little heart in it, a little acting. I really enjoy every minute of it." When Follow Through began, Dolly's community--part of Pennsylvania's huge Keystone Central school district--opted for an instructional approach that emphasized the basics, reading and math, but taught them in the context of a completely individualized program. Keystone Central chose the Individualized Early Learning Program developed at the University of Pittsburgh's Learning Research and Development Center. Today Dolly Hanley is completely at home in a classroom--an innovative classroom at that--but this took careful preparation.

Education in Keystone Central had always been quite traditional. If parents were going to accept an innovative teaching style, they had

to know something about it. If they were to be supportive of their children's school experience, they also needed to learn about ways they could help at home. The first step toward building their acceptance and cooperation was to orient parents to the individualized curriculum. Parents like Dolly were recruited to attend six week training sessions. During the first week they learned how the reading and math objectives were organized, how individualized materials were used, and how teachers and aides functioned under a novel classroom management system. Then they went into the schools. There they worked--several hours per day, three days a week for four to five weeks--right in the classrooms with their children. Follow Through paid a small stipend so that mothers of small children could afford babysitters while they worked at school.

The scene that greeted these parents when they first walked into a Follow Through classroom must have been very different from anything they had seen in their own school days. The children worked independently at their seats, or at special centers outfitted with headsets and audio cassette players. There were stacks of math booklets and reading materials, prominently labeled, on shelves lining every wall. The teacher was not stationed at the customary desk at the front of the room, but moved among the children as they worked, giving on-the-spot mini-lessons and answering questions. An aide sat at a table checking and recording children's completed work. Students moved around the room freely, chatting occasionally with other children,

whenever they needed to get new materials for their next assignment.

To uninitiated parents it might have seemed as if the teacher had lost all control of the class. But trained parents could tell the children's movement and chatter had purpose and direction. Children were managing on their own to find materials, do their assigned tasks, get their work checked, and replace the materials in proper order.

There was plenty for parent trainees to do in such a classroom. They could listen to children read, supervise special projects, make materials, drill on phonics or math, and check off children's work as it was completed. The fact that parents were already trained saved time and made it easier to fit them into the daily routine. Even a few retarded parents found a place gathering materials, passing out math booklets, or sitting with a particularly fidgety child.

How did teachers react to the influx of parents? Naturally, there were adjustments to be made. The gung-ho parent who marched in with a red pencil and said "Where do I start?" had to be encouraged to sit and watch for a while to understand the natural flow of classroom work. The mother who hovered over her own child had to have more specific activities planned for her with other children. But today, a first grade teacher in Texarkana has nothing but enthusiasm for parent participation. "I've even had two parents at a time working besides myself and the aide. I could use nine every day. The more help I get, the better I like it." Many Follow Through teachers agree with her.

In a rural West Virginia school district last year, parents filled in when the classroom aides were plagued with frequent illnesses. "I don't know what we would have done without the parents," says the local Follow Through director. "We figured out they worked the equivalent of two or three full time teachers. I mean, they're active in the classroom." If a school program can make parents feel needed and appreciated, then their eager participation comes as no surprise.

Teachers attribute an increased interest in traditional parent-school activities to Follow Through's parent training. A Pennsylvania teacher comments: "Before, we'd have an open house at school, and maybe two parents would show up. Now we have more parents than that in and out of the school all the time. They're here to see what's going on." A Texarkana aide recalls: "Where I worked before, I never came in contact with any parents. They just dropped their children off at school. But in Follow Through the parents come to the classroom and you get a chance to talk to them and explain what's going on. It makes us feel good to know that they're interested and that they feel like they're helping out too."

Through their classroom work, parents are learning about the process of education and how it relates to things their children do at home. They also have an opportunity to observe how teachers maintain classroom control. "I understand a lot more about children, being around the Follow Through program," says one mother. "I do too," says another. "You learn how to work with them a little more. How to cope with them."

One of the most satisfying outcomes of parent training seems to be the confidence the parents begin to feel in their own role as educators. "The school can only do so much," says one parent, "and there's a lot the parents are just going to have to do at home. The teachers just can't teach so many children everything they have to know."

Working in an individualized learning program, they also begin to see that children really do learn at different rates. Dolly Hanley, the Pennsylvania aide who so enjoys books, had no trouble learning to read. But her son had real difficulties with reading, and she worried that as a parent she had "done something wrong." Working in the classroom, she learned that some children just need more help than others. She learned to pick out books that were right for her son's level of reading ability. This helped, she says, when her other two children came along.

Incidentally, Dolly was a high school drop-out when she joined Follow Through as an aide seven years ago. The class was learning Roman numerals at the time, and some Dolly could not remember from her own school days. She took the curriculum materials home at night to keep one step ahead of the kids. It was not long before she decided to finish her high school education. So, when the Follow Through curriculum specialist made routine stops at the school to deliver classroom materials, she brought materials for Dolly, too, and helped her when she needed it. Last year Dolly took the GED test. She is now a high school graduate.

Like Dolly, many Follow Through parents have had little education and are reluctant at first to come into the schools. "Now everybody's coming to school," says a Texarkana curriculum specialist. "The parents feel comfortable about it, because they have the training program, and they've heard of other parents coming in who didn't have an education. They feel good, because now they have a chance to do a few things at home that might help too."

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Parent training programs have brought many parents into the schools. But parent involvement in Follow Through does not begin or end at the classroom level. In many cases it starts in the home.

On Thursday mornings in Renovo, Pennsylvania, eight or nine Follow Through mothers, clad in bermudas or housedresses, hair in curlers, gather around Mary Jane Wilson's kitchen table for coffee and chatter. They are one of several parent "cluster groups" organized by Esther Brooks, Keystone Central's parent coordinator. The mothers have coffee and sweet rolls for about a half-hour, then all gossip ceases, the table is cleared, and they begin their special activity for the day.

"We do mostly art projects," says Esther, "and while we're doing them, we talk." They weave with popsicle sticks, decorate a cake to look like a clown, make paintings out of colored grains of rice, prepare food or holiday decorations, or teach Esther how to crochet. And all the while they talk--about menus and the price of food, about

pamphlets containing housekeeping hints and shopping tips, about the tough problem of coping with kids. "It's easier to talk when our hands are busy," Esther points out. During a messy session with colored rice and paste, a mother absent-mindedly wipes her fingers on her blouse, and then suddenly says, "Oh! Now I know why my boy came home from school with glue on his clothes."

"To them it's their fun thing," says Esther, "but everything we do is something the mothers can do with their school-age child, or even with their preschooler." Sometimes they talk about school, too, and problems their children are having with their teachers or school subjects. Esther directs them to people in the school district who can help.

In this Pennsylvania Follow Through project, parent cluster groups are the real grass roots of parent involvement. They are never larger than the number of people who can fit around a table in a parent's home. The atmosphere is relaxed and intimate. Shy parents have a chance to ask questions and speak their minds. These meetings are often a stepping stone to further involvement in their children's education, either as a classroom volunteer or as a member of the local Policy Advisory Committee. They are a means of establishing contact with Follow Through parents and encouraging them to take an active interest in their child's schooling.

Parent cluster groups are also a means of keeping in touch with parents' day-to-day concerns and special needs. Health problems,

family crises, financial difficulties, lack of clothing--all these are problems teachers may not be aware of but that can severely affect children's school attendance and class performance. Esther Brooks serves as a link between these parents and the social and health services provided by Follow Through and other county agencies. Parents trust Esther because she is one of them. She lives in a government low-income housing project, and her own sons have come up in the Follow Through program. If parents cannot or will not come to cluster groups, Esther visits them in their homes, just to talk and keep in touch. Sometimes she brings along the social worker, or even a nurse who can do simple medical tests in the home.

There is a personal success story in Esther Brooks's Follow Through involvement. When her children entered the program, she spent so much time at the school that she told them, "You better charge me rent or hire me." So they hired her as an assistant to the parent education specialist, a job which evolved into parent coordinator and led into activities and places she never imagined possible. She chaired the Policy Advisory Committee, worked on budgets, conducted numerous workshops, and traveled around the country on Follow Through business. Esther now has plans to attend the local college for formal training in the social services. Thanks to Follow Through, she already has the experience "but not the paper" to move ahead in that field.

In other Follow Through communities a variety of mechanisms have evolved to bring parents together in education-related activities.

After-school parent classes serve many of the same functions as parent cluster groups. In Belcourt, North Dakota, Indian mothers get together to do ceramics, beadwork, and leatherwork. In Akron, Ohio, inner-city mothers hold sewing classes, go bowling, do slimnastics, and have their own choral group. Parent newsletters are popular, and activities for the whole family--holiday festivities, skating parties, picnics--are planned throughout the year. Follow Through parents even occasionally get together at regional conferences, where they share art projects and discuss ways they can further their children's education (including organizing pressure groups to get continued funding for Follow Through)!

Some activities are geared to the psychological side of parenting. Many of Follow Through's low-income parents are at a stage in their lives when they have the biggest needs and are least able to meet them. They do not have or cannot afford babysitters. They have no transportation. Some are products of unthinkable distorted childhoods and home lives. The stresses are enormous, and they spill over into family relationships. Often unintentionally, parents sometimes teach their children that they are "not okay." To counteract the adverse effects of such pressures upon children's school performance, some Follow Through parent groups have institituted self-development courses and family living workshops; others have invited in speakers on child abuse and rape.

In one community, the psychological needs of parents are the special concern of Follow Through staffer Susan Antram. In her five to eight week course, "Exploring Personal and Family Effectiveness," she helps them learn to recognize sources of personal and family stress and to develop effective ways of coping. She hopes this will have a positive impact on the lives of Follow Through children, both at home and in school. "How kids view themselves and feel about themselves is paramount in school," says Susan, "and parents are the number one input into what kids think about themselves."

Through a combination of parent effectiveness and assertiveness training, parents explore new ways of interacting with their children. They learn to help them discover the joy of learning and to build their self-esteem. Susan feels this is bound to affect school achievement. "If children's intellectual apparatus is intact, and if they are emotionally free, if their energy is not tied up in the defense of their own okay-ness, then when they get into that classroom, they can learn."

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A bulletin board in the Lock Haven Follow Through office displays the names and addresses of all legislators representing the district. In Texarkana, Arkansas, a parent newsletter describes an upcoming hearing on Follow Through appropriations and urges that "brief and honest" letters be written to the committee head, with copies for senators and representatives. A parent group in Waterloo, Iowa,

corrals a visiting senator to speak at its annual recognition dinner. Eight hundred handwritten letters emerge from the small town of Elkins, West Virginia, to stay yet another threat of funding cutbacks. Parent involvement in Follow Through goes beyond home and school. It extends into the realm of political action.

Parents' political involvement begins with the federally mandated establishment of a Policy Advisory Committee (PAC) for each local project. Each PAC is composed of at least fifty percent low-income parents, supplemented with parent-elected representatives of local agencies and businesses. The PAC is empowered to oversee development of program components, define goals, and outline policies and procedures. It participates in the screening and selection of new Follow Through teachers, aides, and staff. It assists in preparing yearly proposals for continued funding. It has money specially earmarked for parent programs. But the PAC has also turned out to be the parents' political arm for getting what their schools need from the local school administration and from Washington.

Parents have a lot to learn in order to carry out PAC's designated functions. In the Keystone Central project, the Follow Through staff sees to it that parents get an orientation to budget categories, auditing systems, union contracts, interviewing techniques, and proposal writing. Their PAC receives monthly briefings on the status of social and medical services, issues facing the district administration, and the progress of school-related legislation. In addition,

the project director, Mary Garcia, has developed a "political primer" for the PAC--a course in how laws are made, how to obtain organizational support, how to convince friends, how to lobby, how to write effective letters to congressmen, and how to exert pressure at crucial points in the political process.

Several years ago, when the national Follow Through program was threatened with drastic funding cutbacks, Mary took a group of parents to Washington to testify at hearings. When a new congressman was elected in her district, a busload of Follow Through parents took a one-day whirlwind excursion to the nation's capitol to chat informally and hold a news conference with the new congressman. Last year a state representative visited remote Renovo, Pennsylvania, to meet with Follow Through parents in the local YMCA building. Many parents are now on a first-name basis with their legislators. The parents are "very politically active," says Mary Garcia, "and we aim to keep them that way and make them more so."

Political involvement has had a decidedly positive effect. The parents' letter-writing campaigns and personal contacts have paid off in continued funding for Follow Through. The expertise developed through the program has helped them apply for other state and federal programs that will benefit their children. Now that they have had a taste of "parent power," they no longer feel they are "just parents." One parent, one of those who had testified in Washington, returned to college a few years ago and had occasion to participate in a mock

hearing in her political science class. She was delighted at the realization that nobody there, not even the professor, had the political know-how that she had as a result of her Follow Through experience. She was "right proud" of that.

Although Follow Through generally involves only a few classrooms in each participating community, whole school districts are feeling the impact of parent politicization. Parents are talking now, of spreading the PAC idea to the junior and senior high level. The time is right for such a movement, because many older children who started in Follow Through are just now entering these upper grades. Their parents have learned the value of participating in the development of new courses, curricula, and policies for handling discipline problems. Some secondary school administrators may at first be reluctant to let parents become that closely involved in decision-making, but the Follow Through experience has been that administrators come to depend on parent participation once they see the good it can do. The assistant superintendent for secondary education in Texarkana, Arkansas, is a case in point. He was quite uneasy about parent involvement when Follow Through first got started there nine years ago. In fact, Texarkana's first proposal was turned down because it did not provide for enough parent involvement. But now he says "it's the best public relations thing the district has ever had."

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It seems that if parents are to become involved in their children's education, someone must give conscious attention to trying to involve them. What Follow Through most effectively demonstrates is that parent power and talent can be tapped if there are specific mechanisms to establish and maintain contact between parents and schools. There must be ways to reach timid parents and parents who have never worked in a classroom. There must be specific things for parents to do once their interest is aroused. There must be group activities so that parents can share experiences and feel a sense of solidarity with each other and with teachers.

The special enthusiasm that colors Follow Through parent programs appears to stem from the nature of the home-school contacts they have set up. These are not superficial. Rather, they are intensive and geared to building commitment. Through parent training programs, parents do more than get an overview of the curriculum. They get a chance to see it working over a period of time in a classroom setting; they participate in the teaching process. Through the Policy Advisory Committee, parents do more than meet teachers and principals. They make policy, they have an impact on legislation. Because their children's educational program is partly a creature of their own making, they have a stake in ensuring its success. When the outcomes are positive, they have themselves to thank as well as the schools.

From Follow Through communities all across the country we hear a chorus of voices wanting to spread the news about parent power.

At the same time, we hear a plea for even more parents to get involved. The parents who never respond to teachers' notes, who never come in for conferences, who never volunteer for classroom work, who never show up for PTA meetings and open houses--these are the parents who have yet to be reached.

But Follow Through is showing us how to make a start at bringing these parents into the schools. In a time ripe with complaints about the poor job the schools are doing, Follow Through is demonstrating that parents have the power to shape the course of education in their communities, and that school teachers and administrators are finding their involvement not only acceptable, but highly desirable. The lesson of Follow Through is how to build active commitment to the idea of home and school working together. The lesson extends beyond the low-income families Follow Through is designed to serve. It is a lesson parents and schools everywhere might do well to learn.